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ABSTRACT

This report defines and describes an advanced model of school-based management in Prince William County, a suburban district considered to be part of the Washington, D.C., metropolitan area. It documents the shift from a "top-down" to a "bottom-up" school-based management approach based on input from parents, teachers, students, and principals within a framework of school board policy and administrative regulation; reviews five pilot school-based management plans and the concomitant functions of administrators, especially principals; summarizes the strengths and limitations inherent in implementation and realization; and predicts the changing roles of the school board and central staff as they relate to school-based management. (JAM)

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Executive Summary

School based management is management operation for public school districts which empowers school building principals with decision-making power to manage their schools backed up with the necessary money and the power to authorize the expenditure of that money. School based management is based upon the concept that parents, teachers, students and principals are in the best position to make decisions regarding what is the best way to operate the school. School-based management is a shift from a "top-down" approach to management to a "bottom-up" approach. However, school-based management is not a license for arbitrary actions by individual schools. It is a system in which the power of the principal is enhanced to run the school based upon organized advice from faculty, parents and students within a framework of school board policy and administrative regulation. School based management is based upon results, not methods. It is based upon accountability of principals. In other words, under school-based management, the principal is judged on results, results, not procedures. The Prince William County Public Schools, now in the midst of a full pilot for school-based management, plans to convert all 58 schools to school-based management on July 1, 1990. The Prince William model is considered to be one of the most advanced forms of school-based management.

The Background

Prince William County is a suburban school district considered to be part of the Washington D.C. metropolitan area. It is considered to be a "bedroom" community of single family homes, although an increasing number of apartments are being built. There has not been a year since World War II that the school population has not increased. For the next several years it is expected that the school district will add over one thousand additional students each year. A number of new schools are being built and additional ones are on the drawing board. The population of the county is about 210,000 with about 40,000 students in the public schools. The population is considered to be average in socio-economic composition. Elementary schools contain grades kindergarten through grade five; middle schools consist of grades six through eight, while the high schools include grades nine through twelve. About half go on to some form of formal education beyond high school.

During the years 1981 to 1987, the school district under Superintendent Richard W. Johnson, developed what was considered to be a highly centralized, if not somewhat autocratic, system of administration. At the end of the 1970's the school district was viewed to be in need of more administrative control and the central control of Superintendent Johnson was the result of that view. However, by the middle of Mr. Johnson's second four-year term, there had emerged a negative reaction to his strong centralized management. Consequently, Mr. Johnson's contract for

the remaining two years of his term were bought up by the school board.

An interim superintendent was appointed, and a national search was begun immediately for a new superintendent--with the assistance of an expert consultant. Within five months a new superintendent, Dr. Edward Kelly, was hired and reported for duty in July 1987. One of Dr. Kelly's first significant acts was to look at the existing administrative philosophy and the accompanying management organization. Within a few weeks he directed that a serious investigation of school-based management be examined for its applicability to Prince William County. A special task force was appointed, chaired by the author. During the fall of 1987 the task force undertook a professional study of school-based management and submitted a recommendation to the Superintendent by January 1, 1988.

Five Pilot Schools Recommended

In summary, the recommendations were that five schools would be converted to a full school based management system on July 1, 1988 for a two-year pilot study. Under this plan, all necessary funds would be transferred to these five principals for 1988-89 to operate their schools. In other words, these principals were to be given their pro-rata share of the school district's entire budget to run their schools. Specifically, these principals would have the power (and money) to hire all employees, clean the building, buy supplies, maintain the building, pay for utilities, or almost anything else needed to run a good school.

In order to determine how much money should be allocated to these five schools, all budgets in the school district were examined during the spring of 1988. Although this complicated process will not be detailed in this article, suffice it to say that allocations were generally made on the basis of the number of students in each of the five schools. As a result of this process, the smallest of the five schools was allocated $1,321,495 and the largest school was allocated $9,526,037 for the school's operation. As of the time that this article was written, the five pilot principals were in the process of expending the funds allocated to them. The funds are being expended according to a plan devised by the building principal and approved by the Superintendent.

School Plans Required

In developing their plans to operate their schools for 1988-89, the five pilot principals were told that they had freedom to organize their schools according to their judgement based on the advice of a school advisory committee. Naturally, the plans had to abide by applicable state regulations, accreditation standards, and local school board policy (unless waived by the school board). As far as administrative regulations were concerned, principals were informed that such regulations could be deviated from with prior approval of the superintendent.

As a result of the freedom and money given to the five principals, a number of innovative changes have taken place in these schools which would not and could not have taken place

without school based management. For example, one elementary school has hired extra tutoring assistance in the areas of math and language arts. This same principal has managed his budget to purchase $13,000 of additional computer equipment. Neither of these actions would have transpired had the principal not had control over his school's budget. Another elementary principal arranged his budget to pay certain teachers extra monetary stipends for supervising certain student activities. A middle school principal, with his new-found budget freedom, was able to hire extra staff for special assignments within the school. And, a high school principal has been able (among other innovations) to expand his library service, improve copy facilities in the school, and pay teachers supplemental stipends for needed extra duties within the school.

The five school plans for 1988-89 are somewhat conservative for a number of reasons. The principals were burdened with extra duties preparing for school-based management; principals were not trained for the type of powewr and accountability called for under school-based management; and, the newness of it all simply caused these principals to be cautious. However, it is hoped that the school plans for 1989-90 will be more dynamic in changing the conventional approach to managing schools and helping students learn.

During the school year 1988-89, two major activities will be conducted with regard to school based management. First, the five schools will be monitored carefully, and second, the entire administrative and supervisory staff of approximately 150 persons

will be involved in numerous inservice activities designed to prepare them for the conversion of the entire school district to school-based management on July 1, 1990.

Cautions Advised

Any school district giving serious consideration to school based management should take careful note of the following suggestions:

1. The superintendent must be strongly familiar with and supportive of school-based management. Otherwise appeals to the superintendent regarding school-based management will be settled in favor of those who oppose it.
2. Similarly, the school board must support the concept; otherwise, end runs will be made by staff to individual school board members who in turn will undermine the efforts of the superintendent to achieve his reorganization.
3. Use an expert consultant to guide staff through complicated and dangerous paths. In the case of Prince William County, the consulting services of Michael Strembitsky were used, a man in great demand for help on this topic. Mr. Strembitsky is the Superintendent of the Edmonton, Alberta, Canada school system. He is the founder of school-based management in that school district and has one of the most complete models on the continent. In the author's opinion, Mr. Strembitsky is the top expert in all matters of school-based management. Regardless, however, of who is chosen as a consultant, great effort should be taken to assure that such a consultant is truly an expert.

4. An extensive inservice program must be implemented to prepare staff for the new demands and opportunities created by school-based management.

5. Some resistence from the administrative bureaucracy can be expected. Some budget holders will see power slipping from themselves to principals; and, some instructional supervisors may see the new power of principals to be at the expense of supervisors. Such resistence must be dealt with firmly.

6. Both the school board and the superintendent must be willing to accept some "mistakes" and controversies during the transition to school-based management. No school district can be converted from one distinct method of operation to a drastically different method without some problems.

7. In states where collective bargaining is strong, there are special impediments to moving to school-based management because of the stultifying affect labor contracts have on change. In such school districts each obstacle must be dealt with as it arises. School-based management poses a curious dilemma for teacher unions. On the one hand, school-based management gives teachers what they have always demanded--a meaningful voice in running the school. However, on the other hand, school-based management means dealing with teachers differently in different schools, thus going contrary to many binding clauses in labor contracts.

8. A school district that decides to go the way of school-based management, should appoint a staff member who reports

directly to the superintendent on all school-based management matters. Otherwise, the entrenched bureaucracy will ride roughshod over the project.

Advantages for School-Based Management

It is too early to tell if school-based management will become the way of the future to manage schools. Early indications, however, are that this method of management possesses several advantages over a conventional centralized system of management.

1. The resources of the school district are put more effectively where they are needed. Let's hypothesize that a principal needs additional shelves for the school library. Under a centralized system of management, he might be told that there is no money for shelves but that there is money to paint his office. The principal, however, does not want or need his office painted and the central office will not give him credit for not painting his office to be applied to the purchase of additional library shelves. Under school-based management, the principal is the budget holder and simply decides to buy shelves and not point his office without any advice or hindrance from the central office.
2. School-based management conserves money. For example, under a centralized system of management, the central office pays all utility bills. Under such an arrangement, there is no incentive for the building principal to conserve energy. Under school-based management, the principals can keep any money they save on energy and apply it to other needs, like

better supplies for students.

3. Better decisions are made and those decisions are better supported. Under a centralized system of decision-making, decisions are made at the top and handed down. Such a process allows those not directly affected by the decisions to make those decisions. Such a procedure is ready-made for criticism. Under school-based management, parents, faculty and students have a meaningful opportunity to give advice to the principal before a decision is made. This method gives parents, teachers and students a greater feeling of ownership for decisions. A greater feeling of ownership provides greater support for decisions, and greater support for decisions provides greater likelihood of success.

4. There is greater chance of productive innovation under school-based management. Under a centralized system of management, all schools are told to function in a certain way. This dictatorial approach to management chills any initiative for creativity and sets up the central staff and the school board for blame when things don't go right. Under school-based management, each school is allowed greater freedom to try new approaches to educational management. Naturally, under this model, there is increased chance that improved means will be found for operating the schools.

<u>The New Role of the Central Office</u>

Detractors of school-based management (too often persons without expertise on the subject) claim that such an approach to

management of a public school system will result in chaos since the school board and the superintendent lose control. Such is not the case however. Under school-based management, the school board continues to maintain control through its normal functions of policy adoption, supervision of the superintendent, budget approval and resolution of appeals to the board. School-based management takes away none of these powers. As far as the power of the superintendent is concerned, school-based management does not diminish that power. The superintendent continues to reign as the chief executive officer.

It is true, however, that school-based management does change somewhat the role of the central staff. The role of the central staff as it relates to school-based management is as follows:

1. Monitoring and supervising educational programs
2. Measuring educational outcomes
3. Formulating policy for school board consideration
4. Providing advice and inservice to teachers and principals
5. Effectively managing the personnel selection and evaluation process
6. Devising better ways of allocating resources to schools
7. Providing information to all levels of management in the system
8. Providing a centralized student transportation system
9. Providing a centralized student food service program
10. Establishing a curriculum for the system

Persons seeking more information about school-based management may contact the author, Richard G. Neal, Director of School-Based Management, Prince William County Public Schools, P.O. Box 389, Manassas, VA 22110, (703) 791-8707.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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